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The parallel paths of conservation of contemporary art and indigenous collections

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Abstract. This paper uses a range of case studies from contemporary art and indigenous collections to explore synergies between the disciplines and pose questions about contemporary perceptions of condition and durability. The idea that value is only connected to original material or specific perceptions of condition has been challenged repeatedly by the very makers and primary users of these collections. Nevertheless, old expectations in relation to collections may still affect conservation processes. The conservator is positioned at the center of these tensions, trying to understand, negotiate and mediate the interests and values of dynamic layers of significance associated with the object being treated. Attempting to homogenize or generalize these relationships would directly affect the complexity of the meanings of the artworks and run the risk of hollowing them.

Keywords: Deterioration, Intent, Interpretation, Longevity, Meaning, Significance, Values, Replicas

Introduction

Although the material and scientific focus that dominated conservation practice in the twentieth century is still the basis of the discipline, the conservation process is now

fundamentally cross-disciplinary and context-dependent. No matter which conservation specialty they represent, conservators today are expected to find strategies to conserve materiality while ensuring that the process and the resulting conserved material are respectful of the object's history and its layers of significance (Avrami *et al*., 2000; Mason, 2002, pp. 5–8). The inherent complexity of these objectives and the skills necessary to achieve them should not be underestimated. This paper uses a range of examples from indigenous collections (loosely referred to as 'ethnographic') and contemporary art to explore mutual dilemmas and highlight how stronger collaborations could inform conservation practice.

Professionals from these fields confront similar challenges in all stages of the conservation process (Table 1). Even defining the scope of these collections shows inherent complexities. These difficulties stem from the fact that both fields are immensely broad, and permeated by tangible and intangible productions that may include objects, sites, documents, performances, rituals, and time-based media of all sorts. The related collections are characterized by extensive ranges of materials. Moreover, traditional raw materials have been increasingly replaced by modern counterparts in the last few decades, which may not have been manufactured to last very long or even to be used artistically. Many of these modern materials have unknown compositions and aging properties, and may be protected by proprietary statuses that obstruct conservation research. The two *Kula* bracelets from the Trobriand Islands (Fig. 1) show the results of similar trends, as the one depicted on the right hand side of the image was made with the traditional shell beads, while synthetic beads were used on the bracelet on the left hand side.

Interest groups associated with both fields, such as artists, originators, descendants of originators, apprentices and assistants, art critics, curators, anthropologists, collectors, and museum visitors, are becoming increasingly more vocal. Conservators working with indigenous collections have been practicing participatory approaches and collaborations with different interest groups for at least 30 years. This shift has undermined old conservation assumptions related to preservation of heritage materials by bringing the human relationships to the fore of the discussion (Clavir, 2002; Johnson *et al*., 2005; Peters *et al*., 2008). Conservators working with contemporary art have also been involved in similar enterprises, which have brought more complexity

to their decision-making processes (SBMK, 1997; Sille & Hummelen, 1999).

One striking difference between the two fields relates to perceptions of authorship: while the contemporary artist enjoys a status of quasi-celebrity, the indigenous artist often remains anonymous even though the contemporary indigenous artist is first and foremost a contemporary artist.

Network of meanings

The productions related to both fields are usually embedded in complex networks of meanings and values that depend on how the material is made, used and articulated. Objects are often associated with performances or rituals, although in some cases, the performances can be the actual work of art, and the objects associated with them a complement. The interconnectivity between the fields is so deep that conservation of indigenous collections has even inspired contemporary artists. This is demonstrated, for example, by Kim-Ling Morris' installation entitled *Re:fugio Statis* (Fig. 2), directly motivated by the conservation of a group of *khipu* in Peru (Fig. 3) (Peters *et al.*, 2008).

Common conservation dilemmas include the appropriateness of using replicas, different ways of understanding authenticity and, more crucially, the subtle differences between 'damage' and 'change'. Notions connected to 'neutrality' that often permeate the conservation discourse further complicate these points. For example, 'artist's intention' (to be understood as 'maker's intention' so as to avoid value added by the word 'art') is often informally evoked in conservation decision-making. However, a short investigation into the concept reveals its intrinsic complexities (Mele & Livingston, 1992). It provoked a lot of discussion a long time ago, after Wimsatt and Beardsley's (1946) *The Intentional Fallacy* was published. Here Dykstra (1996) summarizes the ideas raised by the publication: '… Simply stated, the intentional fallacy insists that our interpretations are our own and we are mistaken if we identify them with the artist instead of ourselves' (Dykstra, 1996, p. 204).

Moreover, in contexts in which the views and values of different groups are taken into account, artist's intention or interpretations made by professional experts may not always take priority. In some contexts, the events that take place after the creation of the material, the so-called 'biographies of things' (Kopytoff, 1986; Smith, 1989), or even market value, may become equally important.

Deterioration and longevity

All material things will go through changes during their existence, but decision-making processes involved in defining what constitutes damage (or undesirable change) may lack transparency unless the values attached to the processes are thoroughly clarified.

Despite the aims of the profession, or maybe because of them, conservators are often fascinated by deterioration and the ephemeral. In fact, deterioration is so intrinsic to human nature that many contemporary artists use it as the main concept of their work, or as a means to achieve their conceptual or aesthetical objectives. The work of established artists such as Anselm Kiefer (Arasse, 2001), Josef Beuys (Adriani *et al*., 1979), or Ai Weiwei (Marlow *et al.*, 2015), to mention a few, are pertinent here. For example, in an interview to curator Tim Marlow, Kiefer acknowledged the challenges that his work may pose, but emphasized that he is only interested in the process, which is never complete (Louisiana Channel, 2015). As part of this ever-evolving process, he might, for example, expose a painting to the elements for long periods of time so that materials continue to mutate on their own.

> 'My idea is that art is fluid, it's a river, it's never finished, it's always in a process. And, I put the paintings outside in the sun for one year, in the rain, and so on. And the painting is still working then … It's the process I am interested in. I am not interested in the end.' (Transcribed from Louisiana Channel, 2015).

In terms of indigenous collections, deterioration and decay may sometimes bring completeness or closure to a process related to an object. This is demonstrated by the

images of *Ahayu:da* from the *Pueblo of Zuni*, in New Mexico, United States. Traditionally, the pieces are carved out of wood and placed in special shrines around the Zuni Pueblo to be used in rituals or as symbols of courage, strength and protection. At a certain point, the older images are 'retired', which entails being moved to special shrines with other retired images, where they are exposed to the elements until they disintegrate completely. Nonetheless, a large number of images have been removed from these shrines over the last two centuries, and ended up becoming part of collections. Although in the last few decades many of these pieces have been returned to their originators (Merrill *et a*l., 1993; Ferguson *et al.,* 2000), many are still found in collections or even offered by auction houses today (Mashberg, 2013).

Conservators working with these collections may sometimes have to find ways to conserve deterioration itself, deterioration mechanisms and/ or decay, or even allow things to go through their natural cycles until they disappear completely, depending on their significance. Nonetheless, a lot of tension is generated by the expectation that collections should long enough for future generations to be able to enjoy them. Lindsay (2005) conducted a survey in some London museums to find evidence for different perceptions of how long things should last, and more crucially, what 'the future' means. He found that expectations vary according to the age of the collection, the materials it is made of, the perceived deterioration of such materials, the artistic or maker's intent, and the perception of what 'the future' means. For most respondents to the survey, this was a point situated about 100 years from the present – although this perception might vary according to the age of the person. Thus, it is clear that defining 'perpetuity' or 'long lasting' depends a lot on context.

The value of the original

Ai Weiwei has been particularly skillful in playing with the ambiguities of perceptions of value or of how long things should last, a reason why a large part of his work pushes the viewer into uncomfortable zones. One of the rooms of his exhibition at the Royal Academy in London in 2015, for example, was dedicated to his interventions on Neolithic pots such as *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*. This consisted

of three photos depicting Ai Weiwei dropping a Neolithic vase, the last photo of which showed the vase being smashed against the floor. *Coloured Vases, 2015, Twelve Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD) and four Neolithic (5000–3000 BC) vases with industrial paint* consisted of ancient pots that had been coated with bright wall paint. Although the artist admitted a playful side to these interventions, he argued that they pose philosophical questions about why those forms have been respected for so long. He dismissed accusations of destruction and contended that he transformed the pieces, and proposes new ways of looking at things (Marlow *et al*., 2015, p. 20), as if in a reverse commemoration of what the vases once were. Some of these 'provocations' are directly relatable to common conservation dilemmas: are these pieces more valuable as contemporary art or as archaeological pieces? What are the implications of the modifications they suffered recently?

As a matter of fact, the uniqueness of original materiality has been questioned in different circumstances, from artistic, philosophical or conservation points of view. Replicas have been used in several conservation contexts, such as when Naum Gabo's cellulose acetate sculptures deteriorated due to the inherent properties of the material (Hackney, 2007), or when the original shark in Damien Hirst's *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* was replaced (Vogel, 2006). In these cases, the concepts expressed through the material were more important and more directly associated with authenticity than the original material. However, deterioration hindered their communication. Gabo's deteriorated sculptures lacked transparency and lightness. They did not express their 'sculptural idea' anymore, a concept that was central to his thinking (Lodder, 2007). The decay shown by Hirst's old shark served as a firm reminder of the possibility of death, not the opposite (Vogel, 2006).

A replica was also used after the repatriation of the *Glasgow Ghost Dance* shirt to the Lakota people in South Dakota, USA. The original shirt originated from the Lakota, and was thought to have been worn by a Lakota warrior killed in the Wounded Knee Massacre in 1890. It is made of cotton fabric and adorned with eagle feathers and bison fur. More significantly, it bears bloodstains and holes believed to have been caused by bullets during the massacre (Maddra, 1996), although tests to verify this were inconclusive. The shirt had been in the collection of Glasgow Museums,

Glasgow, Scotland, since 1892. It was returned to the Lakota people in 1999, after a 4-year campaign led by the Wounded Knee Survivors Association and with strong support from Glaswegians. After the return, Marcella Le Beau, a Two Kettle descendant of a survivor of the massacre, made a shirt inspired by the original one and presented it to the people of Glasgow (Glasgow City Council, 2000). The piece is one of the highlights of Glasgow Museums today, which shows that replicas can also carry a lot of significance, depending on why they are made and how people engage with them.

Pratchaya Phinthong explored some of the nuances involved in these processes in an exhibition at the Chisenhale Gallery in London in 2013, in which he used a replica of the *Broken Hill skull* from the Lusaka National Museum in Zambia. The original skull, also known as *Kabwe 1*, is an important fossil (*Homo heidelbergensis*) that has been at the Natural History Museum in London since its discovery in Zambia in 1921. Despite its importance to the history of Zambia, the Lusaka Museum only owns a replica of the skull, which is on permanent display. It is introduced to visitors by Kamfwa Chishala, a Zambian museum guide who tells the history of the skull and highlights its importance for human evolution theories and Zambia's national identity. After visiting the exhibition in Zambia, Phinthong decided to replicate the display in London. For this, he brought the replica of the skull, its plinth, and Chishala, so that he could present the skull to gallery visitors on the same terms he did in Zambia (Chisenhale Gallery, 2013; Williams, 2013). The guide's presence facilitated the mediation of the history and values associated with the replica, the gallery visitors, and with the original piece at the Natural History Museum, which was put on display for the first time concomitantly with Phinthong's exhibition. The London installation infiltrated the skull's historic narratives with values and connections associated with the three contexts, and exposed the complicated roles that original fabric and replicas may play in these relationships.

Conclusions

The relationships between contemporary art, indigenous collections and conservation are varied and dynamic given the breadth of these fields and the complexity of the

networks of meanings and values in which they are embedded. The artworks discussed above showed the connectivity among the disciplines and posed questions about contemporary values of authenticity, perceptions of condition and durability that are at the core of conservation of these collections.

The idea that value is only connected to original materiality or specific perceptions of condition has been challenged repeatedly by the very makers and primary users of these collections. Conservation approaches vary according to values connected to the object under conservation, current and original contexts, perceptions of ideal condition, artist's or maker's intentions or views, original use, market trends, national, international politics, and others. Nevertheless, old expectations in relation to collections may still affect conservation processes. The conservator is positioned at the centre of these tensions, trying to understand, negotiate and mediate the interests and values of dynamic layers of significance associated with the object under conservation. Attempting to homogenize or generalize these relationships would directly affect the complexity of the meanings of the artworks and run the risk of hollowing them.

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Figure 1. Two Kula Bracelets from the UCL ethnographic collections. On the left, the pendants are made with plastic beads, while the other bracelet was made from the more traditional shell beads. Both were collected in the Trobriand Islands. Courtesy of the UCL Ethnography collections. Photo: Renata F. Peters.

Figure 2. Kim-Ling Morris, *Re:fugio Statis*, 2012; art installation inspired by a project in San Cristóbal de Rapaz. Courtesy of Kim-Ling Morris. Photo: Kim-Ling Morris (http://www.kimlingmorris.com/refugio-statis.html).

Figure 3. The *khipu* of San Cristobal de Rapaz, Peru, after conservation. Courtesy of the Comuneros of San Cristobal de Rapaz. Photo: Renata F. Peters.

Table 1. Parallel paths of contemporary art and indigenous collections

Contemporary art	Indigenous collections
Complex and broad definitions	
Tangible and intangible features/productions	
Organic and inorganic materials	
Traditional materials and modern replacements	
Interest groups increasingly more vocal	
Participatory processes	
Meaning may depend on articulation	Meaning may depend on function
Time-based media	Associated with intangible features
Performances	Rituals
Conceptual (concept over conventional aesthetic/material focus)	Power or sacredness may be more important than material fabric
Strong influence by art market	Influenced by politics
Clear authorship	Unidentified authorship